

Introducing Expressive Vocabulary

Background

Vocabulary is the term we use to describe the total number of words and phrases an individual understands at some level. Language researchers often describe vocabulary being further subdivided into receptive vocabulary, which are words understood from listening or reading, and expressive vocabulary, which are words communicated by speaking or writing. Receptive or passive vocabulary is typically far larger than expressive vocabulary, including many words that are at least partially understood but not fully integrated into one's expressive vocabulary. To succeed academically, students need to not only recognize a wide array of specialized terminology, but also comfortably utilize sophisticated vocabulary in both oral and written contexts.

Instructional Implications

Research suggests that the comprehensive development of academic vocabulary, the particular terms used primarily in academic settings, requires directly teaching new terms (receptive vocabulary) and structured tasks that require students to apply newly acquired words in discussion and writing to build their expressive vocabulary. Unfortunately, simply listening to articulate language used by a teacher or encountering novel terms in a reading selection will not automatically transfer to confident and competent student application. Practical guidelines for introducing new terms as well as fostering expressive vocabulary development via structured discussion and writing tasks are provided in the following sections.

Steps to Teach a New Term

1. Pronounce the word and clarify the part of speech.

*This article focuses on an ecstatic moment in a high school student's life.
Ecstatic is an adjective, a word used to describe.*

2. Ask students to all repeat the word once or twice.

Say the word ecstatic with me. (ec stat' ic)

3. Explain—provide an accessible synonym and/or a brief explanation.

Ecstatic means extremely happy.

4. Elaborate—make connections (image, descriptive sentence, etc.).

Showing image: a picture of a soccer team receiving the championship trophy.

Showing sentence: I was ecstatic when our team won the soccer championship.

5. Assess—Ask focused questions to see if students seem to grasp the word's meaning (vs. Any questions? Do you understand? Is that clear?).

Would you be ecstatic if you won the lottery?

Would you be ecstatic if you were assigned a 20-page report to complete over Spring break?

Steps to Structuring the Expressive Use of a New Term

Simply telling students to use newly taught words in discussion and writing activities is not likely to significantly enhance expressive vocabulary. Students will be far more likely to independently use a richer variety of academic language if they have had the benefit of initial structured classroom application tasks.

Structured Oral Applications via Guided Writing and Discussion

Discussion:

1. Review the target word.

"One of our target academic terms that means exceptionally happy is _____.
(that is correct, ecstatic)

2. Model the appropriate use of the new term in a complete sentence (with appropriate syntax and grammar).

"I was ecstatic to hear our team had won the championship."

"I was ecstatic when I learned that our team had won the championship."

3. Provide one or more sentence starters for students to complete individually

"I was ecstatic when _____."

"I was ecstatic to _____."

4. Partner rehearsal: Students take turns sharing their examples using complete sentences including the target word.

5. Class discussion: Structured sharing of relevant examples, provide feedback and remodeling as necessary.

Writing:

Linguistic scaffolds such as sentence starters or paragraph frames are particularly helpful for less proficient writers; however, they are not meant to be straitjackets for students capable of more creative and autonomous application. Without structured applications, students most in need of developing academic discourse skills are apt to flounder, producing poorly constructed written products comprised largely of everyday spoken English.

1. Design a task that warrants the application of the new vocabulary.

For example, sentences, paragraphs, and essays.

Sentence Level

Provide relevant sentence starters that model the appropriate use of the word as well as sentence structure (syntax and grammar).

"I was ecstatic (base form of verb: e.g., to learn that_____, to receive_____, when I + verb/past tense)."

Paragraph/Essay Level

Provide a relevant sentence starter for each of the suggested terms.

Provide a relevant paragraph frame including a topic sentence, transitional expressions, and target vocabulary.

2. Assessment rubric

Use of target vocabulary is identified.

For example, "The writer appropriately applies 4–6 new lesson terms."